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The Great Emergency

AN ADDRESS BY

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Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the

National Security League

HOTEL ASTOR, NEW YORK CITY

May 2nd, 1917



[1917]

ISSUED BY THE

NATIONAL SECURITY LEAGUE,

31 PINE STREET

NEW YORK CITY

THE GREAT EMERGENCY

An Address by J. Bernard Walker.

If ever there was a time when a great country was confronted with a stupendous crisis in its history, that country is the United States, and that time is today.

The great war, upon which at last we have ourselves embarked, is so complicated that no man in the present hour can predict, with any certainty, to which side the tide of final victory will turn.

And I say this with full realization of the fact that our entry into the war has brought to the side of the Allies unlimited wealth, vast industrial resources, a great navy, and resources in men for the creation of a vast army.

Six months ago, the entrance of the United States into the war would have meant the absolute triumph of the Allies, for six months ago outside of Germany it was not believed that that country would commit itself to the horrible barbarities of an unrestricted submarine warfare. Today, however, this twentieth century piracy is in full swing, and these modern successors to Morgan and Captain Kidd are sending helpless noncombatants to the bottom of the sea with a cold-blooded ferocity, the contemplation of which would make even a Morgan blanch.

Now, Mr. Chairman, I have spoken of the present as the greatest crisis in our history, and in such a crisis it is imperative that we should keep our judgment well balanced and preserve our vision absolutely clear. In judging of this crisis we must maintain a just sense of proportion and a true perspective; and if we do this we shall see at once that absolutely the most important element in this crisis is the submarine war, inasmuch as upon the issues of that war depend the alternatives of a complete crushing of German militarism in Europe, or of our having to fight that militarism in our own waters and within our own territory.

Therefore, I do not hesitate to say that the absolutely imminent and imperative duty of our authorities is to bend all the strength of our Navy, present and future, actual and potential, to the defeat of the German submarines, for I repeat, that upon the success or failure of the German U-boats depends, for us, the winning or losing of the great world war.

Deliberately Drove U. S. into War.

Has it never occurred to you what an amazing thing it was that Germany, hard pressed as she now is, out-matched in money, men and munitions, should deliberately have added this great country to her burdens? Why did she do it? Feather-brained her philosophers and professors may be, but feather-brained her military and naval men are not, and when they deliberately drove this country to take arms against them by sinking our ships, they did so because, after a careful estimate of their ship and engine-building facilities, they came to the conclusion that they could set submarines afloat upon the high seas in such numbers that they could shut off the United States from Europe, and thus at once neutralize the effect of our entrance into the war by starving out the Allies.

Can the Germans do this? Their success depends upon two things; first, upon the German submarine-building capacity, and secondly, upon the capacity of the Allies to build anti-submarine craft and set afloat new shipping faster than the Germans can sink it.

Now it is just here in the construction of new shipping, and particularly in the building of anti-submarine war craft, that the United States should at once exert its maximum effort. If the naval authorities get the true perspective upon the great crisis in which we find ourselves, they will at once cease work upon battleships, battle-cruisers, aye, and even upon our fast scouts, which cannot be ready until the war is over, and they will lay down to the full limit of our shipbuilding capacity destroyers and a large type of sea-going submarine chasers.

The immediate duty of the Navy, as I see it, is the construction of a vast fleet of large, sea-keeping, powerfully armed surface ships, which will be sent into the submarine infested area at the rate of at least half a dozen surface ships of the Allies for every one of the sub-surface piratical craft that the Germans are able to set afloat.

German U-Boat Capacity.

What is the submarine-building capacity of Germany? How long does it take her to build a U-boat, and how many can she turn out within the month? Nobody outside of Germany knows. But we can make a pretty good guess, not at the number of submarines that she is building, but at the number that she could build, if she wished to. And because she has stated, with very good reason, that in this submarine warfare lies her one last chance of victory, we may as well make up our minds to the fact that Germany is dropping all construction on capital ships and is bending the whole of her shipbuilding and engine-building strength to the construction of submarines.

In war, perhaps more than in any other contest of strength, it is perilous to underestimate the resources and strength of the enemy. That is one of the truisms which are so true that we are in danger of overlooking them altogether. Thus, in regard to the German submarine campaign, I note that there is a tendency to underestimate its potential danger to the Allies, and therefore, in the event of its success, to ourselves.

It is generally believed that the submarine-infested areas are so completely covered by the anti-submarine fleets of the Allies, that the strength of the German attack is constantly being weakened by very large losses; but if we analyze the testimony, and apply to it the cold criticism which we would use in any other enterprise; in other words, if we brush aside unauthenticated rumors and confine ourselves entirely to official statements, we shall find that the Allied governments have never made any definite statement whatsoever as to the number of German and Austrian submarines that have been captured or sunk.

It is only recently that I have been able to obtain a conservative estimate, in quarters where reliable statistics are available; and I am informed that a total loss of one hundred would be, if anything, an over-statement of the truth. This figure includes many boats which were supposed to be lost because they were believed to have been heavily hit by shell-fire.

Losses Exaggerated.

For some months I have had a growing conviction, based upon a very close study of the campaign, that the submarine losses were not nearly so large as represented and that with the growth in size, speed and sea-keeping qualities of the submarine, the problem of meeting and breaking up the so-called blockade is becoming increasingly difficult.

It is my belief that at the time of the Jutland fight, when the German High Seas Fleet was driven back, with heavy losses and in a badly battered condition, to its naval bases, Germany, realizing the hopelessness of any attempt to defeat or break through the British fleet, determined to cease all work upon the construction of capital ships and bend its whole ship and engine-building capacity to the creation of a great fleet of submarines for war upon enemy and neutral commerce. Saying and except that this was an utterly illegal form of warfare, the Germans were perfectly right in stating that herein lay their "last chance of victory." For it is a fact that, granted a sufficiently large fleet of submarines, the Allies can be, if not starved, at least so hampered by a shortage of food and raw materials for the manufacture of guns, shells and military equipment, that they will be unable to win such an absolute victory as to enable them to dictate the terms of peace. This is the situation as Germany sees it to-day. She has stated that it is her purpose to force the Allies to a compromise peace, and whether she can do it or not depends first and last upon her ability to set afloat and man, within a definite period of time, the thousand or more submarines which would enable her thus to bring the Allies to their knees.

What is the German submarine-building capacity? Is it sufficient to enable her, say within the year, to build, equip and man a thousand or twelve hundred boats? Nobody outside Germany can answer that question; but I believe that she is probably well able to do this, provided, of course, that she is not herself brought to her knees through collapse of her finances, through starvation, or by the absolute overthrow of her armies.

Standard Type of Craft.

Of course, the only plan by which Germany could build a thousand submarines in a year, would be by what has come to be known as the manufacturing method, of which a notable example is found in the great Ford plant at Detroit. It is pretty safe to say that she has adopted a standard type of craft, the details of which are based upon the experience of the past two and a half years, and that she has enlisted the whole of her shipbuilding plants, public and private, and a corresponding number of her engine-building firms, in this work.

I have made investigation of the capacity of the German yards as regards building ways, and it discloses the interesting fact that, without laying down any additional ways, she could have under construction at any given time about 530 submarines of the size of the U-53 which came to Newport last year. The 800-ton submarine requires about 30 feet of clear width in order to allow a working space around the hull, and its length is something under 250 feet. Each of the three 625-foot dry-docks at Wilhelmshaven, for instance, would permit of the construction of six submarines on its floor, and eight boats could be constructed in each of the larger docks, 822 feet in length. Also the floating docks, of which the Germans have so many, would form excellent building ways. The smaller dry-docks, 500 feet or less in length, and the floating docks would take two, three or four submarines, as the case might be. Moreover, ways suitable for submarine construction can be built rapidly on foreshore or riverbank, and the actual shipping and dock-yard capacity, so far as building ways is concerned, could quickly be

doubled. If the Germans thought fit, they could have a thousand submarines under construction at the same time.

The limiting factor as to time-capacity, however, would not be the provision of ways, or even the construction of the hulls, but rather the rapid construction of the internal equipment. Of this the engines would present the least difficulty; for Germany is the great Diesel-engine country, and if they extended themselves in a concerted effort of this kind, the leading heavy-oil engine builders, such as Krupps, the Emden Works, the Augsburg Works, and the Neuremburg Works, reinforced by less known firms and the large number of engineering plants which could be requisitioned for this work, would be well able to take care of the demand. The principal difficulty would be to supply the special apparatus in the way of periscopes, gyroscopic compasses and the other mechanical details, which must be of the very finest workmanship and require special knowledge and skill. Germany, however, is famous for her optical work, and unless there was a shortage of the materials required, the instrument makers should be able to keep pace with the shipbuilder and the builder of engines.

More than 200 Afloat.

As to the time for construction, one large shipbuilding firm in this country has assured me that if its plant were doing nothing else, it could turn out a submarine of the German type in five months time. Our Naval Construction Corps estimates that it would take seven months. If Germany is concentrating her whole shipbuilding resource upon the task, I believe that six months might be taken as a fair average.

The Central Powers may have two hundred submarines afloat, (and I think it is possible that they have many more than that) and if, as is more than likely, they have some five hundred on the ways at the present time, this would mean that in six months they would have seven hundred U-boats available, and twelve hundred by next Spring.

But the crews? The German naval personnel numbers over 150,000 men. Her idle battleships can supply all the men required to man the submarines as they are successively set afloat.

Here, as I see it, is the immediate danger point in this great conflict into which we have now entered. It is here that we should apply, and should at once apply, our whole effort. If we refuse to do this, and elect to fight a purely defensive war, and the Allies should have to make a peace favorable to Germany, we may ultimately find ourselves face to face with the High-Seas Fleet of Germany, and the veteran armies, ten millions strong, of the four nations of the Central Powers.

Let us then be wise and assume the worst, which is that Germany is able to build, and is now building, submarines at the rate of a hundred a month and a thousand to twelve hundred a year. If that is so, it will explain the recent rapid increase in the number of sinkings. If that is so, it means that unless we, in common with the Allies, outbuild Germany in destroyers and fast submarine chasers, she is in a fair way to make good her boast and force an inconclusive peace upon the Great Alliance, to which we form the latest addition.